



Information Brief

Character Education

In response to recent incidents of violence in schools across the country and appeals from our nation's citizens to achieve greater civility in our society – in the schools, in the workplace, in our homes, and in our communities - character education has taken a front seat in schools as a way to address these aspirations. The development of character is a critical aspect of healthy development for all children and youth and one in which young people themselves along with their schools, families, and communities all have a role to play. Although there are many models of character education available for use by schools, good programs adhere to a specific set of fundamental principles.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:

- *The school is a caring, respectful, encouraging community.*
- *A written school improvement plan that includes provisions for fostering students' social, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development is in place and is reviewed annually.*
- *School staff, families and community develop, communicate, and support clearly defined, appropriate high behavioral expectations.*
- *An engaging curriculum is implemented that addresses social, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development and aligns with the district's guiding principles, student learning goals and standards and benchmarks.*
- *A documented assessment system addresses student learning in social, emotional and behavioral as well as academic areas, is integrated with curriculum and instruction provides for monitoring over the course of instruction, and forms the basis for program improvement efforts.*
- *The school has a variety of programs and services intended to prevent or intervene early with students' social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties.*
- *Schools support families to be partners in their children's education.*
- *Community agencies/organizations, individuals and schools work together to provide and engage in asset-building activities that are known to be factors that contribute to success for children and youth in school and throughout life and that support families in their efforts to raise their children.*

INTRODUCTION

A parent's greatest hope is that their child will grow up to be a kind, caring adult. Teachers want to educate respectful and motivated students. Employers want to hire honest and productive workers. And, we all want to live in a society composed of people with good character. Schools of character support core values such as respect, responsibility, caring, and citizenship that form the moral fiber of our society. These core values also are the essence of the teaching that begins in our homes. Schools and families that understand and agree upon character traits that they value and who partner to support each other in the moral development of our children and youth can make a dramatic difference in the social, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual development of youth.

WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION?

What It Is - Character development is the process of becoming ethical, responsible individuals. Character education provides our youth with skills needed for this to occur. It is a growing national movement that

espouses the belief that the social, ethical, and emotional development of young people is as important as their academic development. Character education can be the vehicle for schools in partnership with families to foster the healthy character development of their students.

What It Is Not - Character education is not a program, curriculum, group of activities, class, or one more thing for teachers to do at school. It should not be an "add-on" program, but instead must be infused throughout a school's curriculum and culture. If done effectively, instead of adding to a teacher's workload, it will help create an environment and attitudes receptive to learning.

RATIONALE FOR INCLUSION

Public education in the United States was originally designed to serve three purposes: 1) to teach the general population to read, write, and count with the goal of creating individuals that would be successful in a free society; 2) to teach job skills so those individuals would have a means of earning a living and the ability to support their families; and 3) to educate the public on the ethical

principles of a democracy so that they understood their responsibilities as a member of that democratic system.

This third ideal has been all but lost as a result of fear of conflict between issues that historically divide church and state. To achieve the original intent of public education, schools need to have local conversations with their constituents (including youth) about ethics, values, and societal standards and to have those common ideals reflected in the curriculum, policies, and daily practices of the school system.

Various studies in recent years make clear that our nation worries about the character of our citizens and that we consider issues related to societal values and morals to be one of our priorities. A 1998 Gallup Poll found that Americans consider crime and violence; decline in ethics, morals, and family values; education; and drugs to be the four issues of greatest concern in society today.

One of the most striking pieces of current research appeared in the March 1999 issue of the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. Researchers found that when teachers taught and managed their classrooms in ways that promoted bonding to school and provided children with skills for social interaction, students' behavior improved, as well as their academic achievement.

Researchers also found that full implementation of these strategies in elementary grades predicted positive effects on students' bonds to school, achievement, and school behavior through age 18. The more attention that is given to social and emotional development, the greater the benefits for students personally, socially, and academically.

What's happening with character education in Iowa?

Effective character education initiatives across the state have produced lower numbers of discipline referrals, incidents on buses, and fights between students. One Iowa elementary school lowered discipline referrals to the office from 387 to two in a three-year period. Another school reduced referrals from bus drivers by 95 percent over four years. Still another school found that they had less trouble getting and keeping substitute teachers because of change in the building climate. Some middle and high schools have focused on building character through sports and work to model good character at athletic events.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION?

Too often, educators don't believe that character education is their responsibility. They may feel insecure about their training in this area and believe

that they are better off sticking to their subject area. Or, sometimes they are afraid to address values within their classroom for fear of repercussions from parents. Character education must be EVERYONE'S job to ensure that messages about behavioral expectations are clear and consistent. These messages apply to all youth AND adults.

"Parents and teachers must encourage young people to work hard academically and make right choices so that they may build meaningful lives and realize their dreams."

- President George W. Bush

An opportunity for youth involvement

Involving youth is key to the effectiveness of any character-building initiative. Too often in educational systems, we do things "for" students but not "with" students. Feeling connected to school promotes the asset of bonding to school that is so critical to healthy development. One way to connect students is to give them responsibility for the day-to-day functioning within a classroom, a building, or at an extracurricular activity. Teaching responsibility and giving students the freedom to set behavioral standards for their work environment not only offers the opportunity to practice the skill in a controlled environment, it also creates "teachable moments" that help students internalize the definition of responsibility.

STANDARDS FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION

A group of researchers and theorists have set national standards for character education programs and initiatives. These are summarized in the following principles: (Lickona, Schaps, and Lewis, Character Education Partnership). An effective character education program:

1. *Promotes core ethical values.* A school committed to character education explicitly names and publicly stands for the values of caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others.
2. *Defines character in terms of thinking, feeling, and behavior for each core value.* Character education helps all members of the learning community know what is good, value it, and act upon it.
3. *Requires an intentional, proactive and comprehensive approach that promotes core values in all aspects of school life core values.* Schools committed to character education see that everything that goes on in school affects students' character. They plan deliberate ways to develop character, and don't wait for opportunities to occur.
4. *Fosters a caring school community.* The school itself must embody good character and progress toward becoming a microcosm of a civil, caring, and just society.
5. *Provides students with opportunities for moral action.* Students need opportunities to apply values such as respect and responsibility in everyday interactions.

6. *Includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them succeed.* Students who succeed academically are more likely to feel valued and cared for as persons. Conversely, students who feel liked and respected by their teachers and peers are more likely to achieve academically.

7. *Strives to develop students' intrinsic motivation.* Students who develop good character are less likely to rely on rewards and punishments to control their behavior and more likely develop an internalized locus of control.

8. *Creates a learning and moral community where students and school staff adhere to the same core ethical values and share the responsibility for character education.* All school staff must be involved and share ownership in a school's character education effort.

"The same values and norms that govern the life of students must govern the collective life of the adult members of the school community."

- Lickona, Schaps, and Lewis, 2000

9. *Requires moral leadership from both staff and students.* Leaders must champion the effort and

ensure that long-range planning and program implementation occur.

10. *Requires full partnership with parents and community.* Parents are the primary educators of their children, and the community plays critical roles in promoting the core ethical values. No character education program will achieve full effectiveness without their involvement.

11. *Must be evaluated for effectiveness.* Schools should assess the staff as character educators, and the character of the school and the students.

SUMMARY

A civil society is dependent upon the healthy development of character in its citizens. This development begins in infancy and is a lifelong journey. The critical stages of early childhood and the school-age years are central to this development that begins in the home and is taught and reinforced in schools and communities. To support families, schools, and communities in this important work, a body of knowledge and strategies is available from the field of character education. When schools, families, and communities join one another to foster the healthy development of character in our young people, good things happen.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

- **Web sites:**

- Success4: <http://www.state.ia.us/educate/programs/success4/index.html>
- Institute for Character Development: <http://www.drake.edu/icd>
- Character Education Partnership: <http://www.character.org>
- The Josephson Institute of Ethics: <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org>

- **In this Handbook:** See "Success4 Critical Elements," and other articles in this section on *Positive Youth Development, Peer Group Strategies, Youth Leadership/Student Empowerment, and School-wide Discipline*. For information beyond the scope of this handbook, see the Resources Section.